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Scientists angered by study on passive smoking

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(Updates with reaction to study)

By Maggie Fox

LONDON, May 13 (Reuter) - Scientists working for three European tobacco companies angered cancer researchers on Monday by saying they could find no evidence that breathing second-hand tobacco smoke causes lung cancer.

The report contradicts the findings of the British health department, which says one Briton dies every day from passive smoking, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which says second-hand smoke causes 3,000 lung cancer deaths a year.

It infuriated scientists working in cancer research, who accused the tobacco firms of trying to manipulate the evidence.

The European Working Group on Environmental Tobacco Smoke and Lung Cancer said its review of 48 published studies showed that non-smokers exposed to tobacco smoke had no statistically higher risk of lung cancer.

"Breathing environmental tobacco smoke is not the same as smoking a cigarette," Jeffrey Idle of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, who headed the group, told a news conference.

"There is no reason to believe that lung cancer is caused by breathing environmental tobacco smoke."

The review was funded by Philip Morris Europe S.A., British American Tobacco Limited (B.A.T) and Rothmans International. Idle said the group worked independently and without interference.

"The tobacco industry are deliberately trying to mislead people if they pretend that passive smoking carries zero cancer risk," said Richard Peto, a professor of medical statistics at Oxford University, who also represents the Imperial Cancer Research Fund.

"Cigarette smoking is the most important cause of cancer in the world and even low doses of it carry some risk."

Dr John Moore-Gillon, a lung specialist who is chairman of the British Lung Foundation, agreed. "The findings of this analysis, which was paid for by the tobacco industry, is in direct contrast to the views of every world-respected expert in the field," he said.

"When the World Health Organisation says one thing about the risks of smoking and the tobacco industry says another, I know which I find easier to believe."

The working group's analysis did not look at problems such as asthma or heart disease which other studies link with tobacco smoke. It reviewed previously published research on lung cancer.

Peto said they had ignored the most important facts. "The key evidence isn't the epidemiological evidence," he said.

"If anybody denies that there is proof beyond reasonable doubt that smoking is a cause of most lung cancer deaths they are either incompetent, uninformed or dishonest," he added.

"The tobacco companies pretend that they want pure scientific research (but) the motive of the industry is money and not scientific truth."

Idle said his group had been surprised to find how few chemicals remained in smoke exhaled by smokers or released from the end of a burning cigarette. He said 95 percent of what a smoker inhales is absorbed by his or her body

Marcel Roberfroid, a professor of pharmaceutical sciences at the Universite Catholique de Louvain in Brussels, said what people ate was a bigger factor.

"Poor diet is probably a major cause of cancer as compared to (passive) smoking," Roberfroid said. People who ate lots of fruits and vegetables and small amounts of fat and meat were much less

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